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SUBJECT: SLOVENIAN EU PRESIDENCY AT THE HALFWAY POINT

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[1B.](#) REFA: LJUBLJANA 00121

[1C.](#) REFb: LJUBLJANA 00102

Classified By: CDA Maryruth Coleman for Reasons (B, D)

Summary

[11.](#) (C) Slovenia has made the most of its limited resources during the first three months of its EU presidency by focusing on what it knows best and turning to outside sources for assistance in other areas. Slovenia appears more amenable than many previous small-country presidencies to seek guidance from the Council Secretariat in Brussels and other EU member states. This is not to say that Slovenia has avoided a leadership role but rather that it understands where it is well-positioned to lead and where it is better positioned to play the role of "honest broker." Slovenia has used its presidency to strongly push for the European development of the Western Balkans, and Foreign Minister Rupel has actively campaigned to advance Western Balkans countries and Turkey along the path to EU membership. Slovenia has also demonstrated that it is willing to look beyond its national interests and act in accordance with what it perceives to be the interest of the entire EU. Slovenia worked with its European partners to coordinate an EU response to Kosovo's declaration of independence in February and moved forward with its own national recognition of Kosovo, despite opposition from business leaders with significant investments in Serbia. Although it is still too early to assess the success of the Slovenian presidency, Slovenia has shown halfway through its six-month term that it is capable of executing the task at hand. We expect Slovenia to continue to cooperate closely with the U.S. in the run up to the U.S.-EU summit in June. End summary.

Generally Receptive to US Views

[12.](#) (C) Slovenia has been generally receptive to U.S. policy positions during its presidency, particularly when there is no EU consensus and our interests are aligned on the issue. Slovenia came through for us with strong presidency statements condemning aspects of the Iranian and Russian elections and by chairing a successful U.S.-EU JHA Ministerial on March 13 and defusing tension over the Visa Waiver Program. In other instances, however, Slovenian officials have resisted our calls for strong leadership by using Slovenia's size as a crutch, telling our officers that the country is too small to influence EU policy. This is usually the response given when the U.S. position diverges from the EU consensus, such as when Post called on Slovenia to redirect the EU climate change debate at the March 13-14

European Council meeting (Reftel A). It is also the common response given when Slovenia has little expertise or interest on the issue, such as our push for additional sanctions on Burma or our attempt to cancel the trip of EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel to Cuba (Reftel B).

¶3. (C) The late-January leak of a Slovenian government memo outlining a conversation between senior U.S. and Slovenian officials does not appear to have done any lasting damage to U.S.-Slovenian relations or affected our lobbying efforts during Slovenia's presidency. The Slovenian press, which characterized the content of the memo as the U.S. making foreign policy demands of Slovenia, kept the issue alive for weeks after the story broke, but eventually the controversy subsided. The fear that Slovenia would seek to publicly distance itself from the U.S. and avoid U.S. policy recommendations appears to be unfounded, as all of the above-mentioned instances in which Slovenia backed the U.S. position occurred after the leaked memo incident. Slovenian officials conveyed their embarrassment over the ordeal and have since increased their internal security measures. Although the issue now appears to have fallen off the radar screen, there is still the distinct possibility that it could reemerge in the press around the time of the U.S.-EU summit in June.

Strong Management, Subtle Leadership

¶4. (C) Slovenian officials have no delusions about the influence of their country within the EU. State Secretary for European Affairs in the Prime Minister's office and chief coordinator for the EU presidency Janez Lenarcic is quick to admit that Slovenia merely hopes to get through its presidency without any significant blunders. This

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self-effacing tone, however, disguises the fact that the Slovenes have done an excellent job planning the calendar and presiding over meetings--two of its key tasks as president of the Council of the European Union. The Slovenes have planned and presided over meetings with a Teutonic fastidiousness--a quality probably inherited from centuries of Austro-Hungarian rule, and a quality distinguishing Slovenia from its EU presidency predecessor, Portugal. U.S. officials visiting Slovenia during the presidency have praised Slovenia for its management of meetings and its convenient conference facilities just 25 minutes outside of Ljubljana.

¶5. (C) Slovenia has impressed Post with its keen management skills, but it has not taken a lead role on many policy issues beyond the Western Balkans. Slovenian officials note that the role of the EU presidency is to objectively preside over meetings and coordinate EU policy rather than direct it. Slovenia therefore considers its primary role to be that of an honest-broker rather than a leader. Slovenia has nevertheless been criticized in the international media for placing its national interests above its consensus-building responsibilities as president in its efforts to address its ongoing border dispute with Croatia. The Financial Times published an article on February 20 that raised concerns held by some EU diplomats that Slovenia was using its presidency to "push the dispute up the ministerial agenda" with the expectation that the EU would side with member state Slovenia over candidate country Croatia. Slovenia has shown in other instances, however, that it is willing to act on behalf of the entire EU. Slovenia moved forward with its national recognition of Kosovo, despite significant opposition from Slovenian business groups and the risk of further vandalism to its embassy in Belgrade.

¶6. (C) One area where Slovenia has shown strong leadership is pushing for the European development of the Western Balkans (WB). Slovenia has lobbied strongly for the European integration of Serbia, in particular, and Foreign Minister Rupel has repeatedly called on the EU to sign a Stabilization

and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia. Despite significant opposition from the Netherlands, which insists that Serbia increase its cooperation with international war crime tribunal in the Hague, Slovenia continues to push the idea. Foreign Minister Rupel intends to make a renewed push after Serbia's early parliamentary election in May.

¶17. (C) The Slovenian presidency has proactively fostered U.S.-EU cooperation in the field of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), and the U.S.-EU JHA Ministerial, held in Slovenia March 12-13, has been one of the highlights of the presidency to date. Slovenia drove forward an ambitious agenda; notably, Slovenia worked hard to manage the controversy that had erupted over the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. These efforts paid off in the form of a joint U.S.-EU statement issued at the Ministerial outlining a "twin-track" approach covering discussions with EU Member States and European Union institutions. Slovenia, which has demonstrated significant leadership since January in U.S.-EU talks on information sharing and data privacy, committed at the Ministerial to work to conclude U.S.-EU talks during its Presidency. This was a key deliverable for the U.S.

France Looming Large but Influence Overstated

¶18. (C/NF) The international media has accused France--which assumes the presidency after Slovenia--of overshadowing the Slovenian presidency as Paris prepares for its own six-month term, but France's influence over the Slovenian presidency appears to be overstated. Slovenian officials are sensitive about the issue and have sought to downplay the role of France, although acknowledging it represents the Slovenian presidency in 111 countries where Slovenia has no diplomatic presence. The Americas Desk at the Slovenian MFA, for example, has emphasized that France would not play a role in the U.S.-EU summit in June, and Slovenia has no plans to invite France to the summit. Post has noticed that France has assumed a prominent role on those issues that it has set as priorities for its own presidency, such as energy and climate change. MFA Director for Southeastern Europe Leon Marc acknowledged to ADCM on March 17 that Slovenia turns to France for policy guidance on Africa, where Slovenia lacks a diplomatic presence, but he quickly added that Slovenia looks to British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and Swedish Foreign Minister Bildt for guidance on the Western Balkans. He estimated that Slovenia consults most frequently with Miliband on a wide array of issues related to the presidency. Marc also told ADCM that Slovenia is often more aligned with Germany than France on the key policy issues, noting that

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Slovenia drafted its presidency agenda very closely with Germany as part of the tripartite presidency.

¶19. (C/NF) In a March 26 meeting, Emboff discussed the role of other EU member states on security issues with Stanislav Vidovic, the Head of the MFA Division for Security Policy. Vidovic, whose division covers primarily counterterrorism and non-proliferation issues, responded that the French have not been so engaged on counterterrorism but have been far more active on non-proliferation, often to the frustration of Slovenian officials. Vidovic explained that France has pushed its agenda on the Slovenian presidency in an unconstructive way. He speculated that the French presidency would not be as successful as the French might hope because France has not worked cooperatively with Slovenia on the issues that Paris has set as priorities for its own presidency. In contrast, Vidovic noted that Slovenia works far more closely and constructively with the U.K., Germany, and the Netherlands on security issues.

Keeping Rupel in Check

¶10. (C/NF) Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, who has the most

visible role in Slovenia's EU presidency, continues to be an unpredictable figure. He has at times adroitly brokered behind-the-scenes negotiations between EU leaders, while at other times has complicated ongoing negotiations with his sometimes impulsive remarks. Among his notable accomplishments has been his role in overseeing the drafting the EU presidency statement following Kosovo's declaration of independence. Rupel met with Charge shortly after the statement was released and proudly detailed how he presided over the difficult negotiations and worked with his European counterparts to establish common language.

¶11. (C/NF) Despite his self-proclaimed deftness in negotiating the EU response on Kosovo, Rupel is not particularly well liked in either domestic or international political circles. The Foreign Minister has a glib manner that is often interpreted as a sign of arrogance. He has been forced to walk back statements on several occasions in the first three months of the presidency. Most notably, he offended Serbian leaders in January when he told international press that Belgrade would jump at the opportunity to sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement; the Serbian leaders responded that Serbia could respond for itself. He also does a poor job articulating his message when he is asked to speak on policy matters outside his realm of expertise, which he is frequently required to do as President of the Council of the EU. He did a notably poor job articulating the EU position on Visa Waiver Program at the Foreign Minister Troika dinner with the Secretary on March 6.

¶12. (C/NF) Rupel has been a frequent topic of conversation in diplomatic circles in Ljubljana. Although some diplomats see Rupel as capable, careful, and diplomatic, the majority assess that his impulsiveness has hurt Slovenia's EU presidency effort. Charge attended a dinner in mid February in which several EU Ambassadors criticized Rupel's management of the MFA and coordination of EU issues, complaining that Rupel frequently speaks off the cuff and causes undue controversy for Slovenia and the EU. He was also accused of mismanaging the "leaked memo scandal" by dismissing Political Director Mitja Drobnic, a capable and experienced diplomat with no confirmed connection to the leak. The move angered many MFA employees and further eroded their confidence in the Minister. The issue continues to resonate in the MFA.

Looking Ahead to the U.S.-EU Summit

¶13. (U) Slovenia will be busy with numerous high-level events over the next three months, including several EU summits. Slovenia will preside over the EU-Japan summit in Japan at the end of April, the EU-Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) Summit with all 27 EU heads of government in Lima on May 15-17, and the EU-Russia summit in Russia sometime in June. Slovenia will host the U.S.-EU Summit in Ljubljana on June 9-10. (Note: This date has not yet been formally announced by the White House. End note.) U.S. and EU officials are still finalizing the agenda for the summit in June, but it is likely to focus on three areas: cooperation on global foreign policy challenges; promoting European enlargement and integration; and building a prosperous transatlantic community. The EU is also pushing for a fourth focus area that would address energy and climate change issues. Slovenian officials have emphasized that the summit

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is a big deal for their presidency, particularly since it is the only summit to be held in Slovenia.

Commentary

¶14. (C) The fact that Slovenia has risen to the occasion and deftly managed the first three months of its EU presidency should come as no surprise to those who have followed

Slovenia over the years. Slovenia displayed the same strong management and organization when it chaired the OSCE in 2005.

Yet Slovenia also suffered from several shortcomings during its OSCE chairmanship, including the tendency to place too much emphasis on consensus, that have resurfaced during the first three months of its presidency. Although Slovenia considers its primary role to be that of an honest broker, there are still several areas where it is worthwhile to engage early and closely in Slovenia. We should continue to consult closely with the Slovenes on those areas where our interests are aligned, such as in promoting the European development of the western Balkans and also in those areas where the EU has not built full consensus, such as the Visa Waiver Program. Close consultations with Slovenia can pay dividends if our lobbying is well-targeted. Looking ahead to the coming months, we expect Slovenia to devote significant time and attention to ensuring a successful U.S.-EU summit.

COLEMAN